



6-1-1949

# Alexander McKenzie, Boss of North Dakota 1883-1906

Kenneth J. Carey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Carey, Kenneth J., "Alexander McKenzie, Boss of North Dakota 1883-1906" (1949). *Theses and Dissertations*. 463.  
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/463>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [zeinebyousif@library.und.edu](mailto:zeinebyousif@library.und.edu).

Alexander McKenzie,  
Boss of North Dakota  
1883-1906

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate Department  
of the  
University of North Dakota

by  
Kenneth J. Carey  
"

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
June, 1949



T1949  
C27

This thesis, offered by Kenneth J. Carey, as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of North Dakota, is hereby approved by the committee under whom the work has been done.

Elwyn B. Robinson  
chairman

Felix J. Houdracket

Walter E. Kaloupek

J. V. Bretwieser  
Director of the Graduate Division

118770

Bdg. Hartberg 3.02 30N49



### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to extend his appreciation to the people who have made this thesis possible. Dr. Elwyn B. Robinson, who took great interest in, and who worked diligently with the author in preparing this work, deserves special acknowledgment. Dr. Felix J. Vondracek gave inspiration to the author in his interest in historical study.

Mrs. Florence H. Davis contributed much to the meager information about the subject, and without her comments much of the data would not have come to light. Appreciation for the willing cooperation of Senator William Langer and Congressman William Lemke is expressed by the author. Secretary of State Thomas Hall, Dr. Herbert S. Schell, Mrs. Fred J. Graham, Fred Goodman, and Roy Johnson contributed greatly to the work.

Kenneth J. Carey



## PREFACE

Alexander McKenzie and the things he did and stood for have all but disappeared from the history of North Dakota. This is a strange and regrettable fact, because McKenzie was one of the most important, if not the most important figure in the development of that state.

I became interested in Alexander McKenzie while reading old copies of state newspapers. McKenzie's name seemed to intrude upon most of the political events of the day, but few people even know his name. North Dakota history is limitless in its possibilities, but little has been written in comparison to the work done in other states. I took it upon myself to make an attempt to preserve what little is now available concerning McKenzie before the sands of time had washed away all traces of his existence.

Much remains to be done in North Dakota if the tales of the hardy men who first braved its hardships are to be kept for posterity. In writing this paper I hope to have contributed something of value to the early history of our state, and it is to the furthering of that end which I respectfully dedicate this work.

K.J.C.



## FOREWORD

Dakota Territory was on the frontier in the 1870's, and was a continual source of wonder to the world. Men from many nations came to this great tract to hunt, build fortunes, settle, engage in artistic work, write travel publications, and explore for the United States Government. The railroads were reaching out to complete their lines across the continent, and the aftermath of the Civil War was causing wholesale unemployment and mass migration.

In 1870 the area of Dakota encompassed what is today North and South Dakota. The controversial Custer Fight on the Little Big Horn was the pinnacle of the clash between the Indian and the white man. The land was fertile, but the weather and the ever-present locust preyed upon man's efforts to build an inland empire.

Society grew and prospered slowly under primitive conditions, while the mingling of many nationalities gradually gave to the Territory a lusty, rugged people. Into this "melting pot" came men of many talents and ambitions. One of these was a young Scotchman, Alexander McKenzie. He was to have an intimate part in the formation of the state of North Dakota and in the great political battles which preceded that event. He came for adventure, glory and gold, and found all before his three-score and twelve years had run their course.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. EARLY LIFE 1850-83 . . . . .	1
II. THE EMPIRE BUILDER 1883-1900 . . . . .	18
III. ALASKA ADVENTURE 1900-01 . . . . .	32
IV. LATER LIFE 1901-22 . . . . .	41
V. DEATH 1922 . . . . .	46
VI. CONCLUSION . . . . .	53
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	57



## CHAPTER I

### EARLY LIFE 1851-83

Alexander McKenzie was born in New York April 13, 1850.<sup>1</sup> His parents were natives of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The tales of his being born in Scotland or in Canada are not substantiated by the records. McKenzie came to the Dakota Territory in 1867 with Don Stevenson's wagon train when he was 17 years old.<sup>3</sup> He was a tall, rugged youth, with boundless energy and a likeable manner. He worked with the Northern Pacific crews between Fargo and Bismarck. Because of his great physical and mental strength, he soon rose not only in the eyes of his fellow workers but also in the estimation of his boss.<sup>4</sup>

When the Northern Pacific stopped in Bismarck in 1873, Big Alec decided to settle in the small frontier town. In the years that followed he was an Indian fighter, sheriff, deputy United States Marshall, and political boss extraordinary.<sup>5</sup>

After his first marriage, and before he became sheriff, he sold a beverage in and around Bismarck which was reputed to have an

---

<sup>1</sup>Bismarck Capitol, December 29, 1938.

<sup>2</sup>Dakota Territorial Census, 1885.

<sup>3</sup>Personal interview with Mrs. Florence H. Davis, Librarian, North Dakota State Historical Library, Bismarck, North Dakota, August 18, 1948.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Grand Forks Herald, June 23, 1922.



anti-intoxication quality.<sup>6</sup> He became well known through this work, and he was recognized as a coming young man with a feeling for the well-being of his fellow-man.

He met a young girl from Brainerd, Minnesota, Mary Ann Hayes, and in 1873 married her in Bismarck. Two daughters and a son were born to this union: May (or Mamie) in 1876, Mary Ann in 1880, and John Alexander (or McLean). The boy died in 1883 at the age of nine, causing lasting sorrow to the big Scot.<sup>7</sup>

The year following his marriage McKenzie won his first important recognition. In 1874 Sheriff Miller and a deputy from Bismarck were drowned in the Missouri river south of Bismarck. The bodies, so the story goes, were found in the buggy, trapped by a sandbar. The dead horses were in the traces. McKenzie, strong, courageous, and persuasive, was selected to finish the term of the dead sheriff.<sup>8</sup> Alec's earlier experiences as a dispatch rider between Fort Abraham Lincoln and other posts along the Missouri doubtless prepared him for his new post.<sup>9</sup> This work had been done in hostile Indian country at the time when the Sioux were intermittently killed and coddled west of the "Big Muddy." At that time Bismarck was on the frontier, and west of the river was Indian country.

In 1876 Alec was elected sheriff in his own right. He was re-elected sheriff four times, and was also deputy United States Marshall throughout these twelve years.<sup>10</sup> Peace and order

---

<sup>6</sup>Mrs. Florence H. Davis.

<sup>7</sup>Dakota Territorial Census, 1885.

<sup>8</sup>Mrs. Florence H. Davis.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Fargo Forum, June 22, 1922.



reigned in Burleigh county under the sure hand of the husky McKenzie. The Marquis deMores spent some time in the Burleigh county jail in Bismarck, and "had rather enjoyed his sojourn with the always interesting Alex McKenzie, then sheriff..."<sup>11</sup> The Marquis had been charged with the murder of Riley Luffsey, a cowboy who had become incensed at the Marquis and his fences.<sup>12</sup> Soldiers from the east and west, bad men of the river, and bull whackers out of the Black Hills, all met in Bismarck. They were not amicable, but Big Alec tamed them. In his office McKenzie sat at a big, reddish colored desk, now in the quarters of the librarian of the North Dakota Historical Museum. Of peculiar design, it has red leather padding partially covering the top and fastened with big brass studs. There is a chair to match. The cabinet section stands almost as high as a man's head. It was a big desk to fit the man, and was the personal property of McKenzie when he was sheriff.

McKenzie was a striking figure in those days. In the words of one who saw the powerful Scotchman, he "has florid features, a splendid physique, wears a blond mustache, and is decidedly handsome."<sup>14</sup>

Mildly concerned with politics when he became sheriff, his interest grew as he saw the tremendous possibilities for Bismarck's growth. The 1883 session of the territorial legislative assembly was the scene of McKenzie's first great political triumph. He had

---

<sup>11</sup>Edna L. Waldo, Dakota (Caldwell, Ohio, 1936), p. 36

<sup>12</sup>Hermann Hagedorn, Roosevelt In the Bad Lands (Cambridge, 1931), p. 63-64.

<sup>13</sup>Mrs. Florence H. Davis.

<sup>14</sup>Waldo, op. cit., p. 271.



become a confidant of many of the leading political figures of the territory, and in particular, Governor Nehemiah Ordway. The political supporters of Ordway were largely from the northern part of Dakota.<sup>15</sup> This backing came from Alexander McKenzie and other influential men of the north, such as Jud LaMoure of Pembina, Henry C. Hansbrough, then of Grand Forks and later of Devils Lake, and Porter J. McCumber of Wahpeton. All three later went to the United States Senate.

It is indicated from some sources that McKenzie and company were using Ordway, and really did not support him for his personal merits. George W. Kingsbury said in speaking of McKenzie: "He is generous to his friends and friendly towards his enemies, and upon the whole about as well liked, 'personally,' as Ordway is detested."<sup>16</sup>

Ordway had been a clerk in the House of Representatives of the United States Congress, and was appointed governor of Dakota Territory, 1880-84, by President Hayes.<sup>17</sup> His term was hectic, and ended with his disgrace and banishment over charges of fraud and attempt to fraud. Ordway was tall and angular, and of some religious conviction. Actually, he was no different from many other men of the time in his wrong-doing, but he had the power of the governor's seat to aid him in his manipulations.<sup>18</sup> In the capitol removal scheme, in which McKenzie, backed by the Northern Pacific,

---

<sup>15</sup>Robert E. Reedy, "The Administration of Nehemiah G. Ordway, Governor of Dakota Territory, 1880-84," p. 65, Unpublished master's thesis of South Dakota University, 1935.

<sup>16</sup>George W. Kingsbury, History of Dakota Territory (Chicago, 1915) Vol. II, p. 1370.

<sup>17</sup>Reedy, Op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 75.



was the leader, it is contended that Ordway became the tool of McKenzie. Ordway even insisted that McKenzie act as his body-guard.<sup>19</sup> This, it is said, contributed greatly to Ordway's downfall, because men did not respect a coward, especially in those days of comparative lawlessness and personal bravery.

Dakota Territory was organized in 1861. Yankton was named capitol then because it was the only real settlement in the area which then encompassed all of what is now North and South Dakota, Montana, and pieces of what are now neighboring states. Previous talk of moving the capitol had come to naught, but in 1882-83 it revived under the able guidance of McKenzie. The reasons advanced for moving the capitol were: Yankton was too far from the center of the territory, communications were too difficult, as Yankton was not on the main rail lines; northern Dakota was more progressive, having a nine to one advantage in newspapers over the southern part; and the bulk of the settlements were in the northern areas.<sup>20</sup>

There had been much controversey over the removal actions. Most of the people in the south opposed the plan, and at first the north was split. At one time it appeared that "the capitol removal matter had apparently been abandoned..."<sup>21</sup> Kingsbury, in his History of Dakota Territory, wrote:

It would, however, appear...that it had been some time in incubation, and was probably brought down from the Northern Pacific head-quarters at Bismarck,

---

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Nelson, Land of the Dakotahs (Minnesota, 1946) p.130.

<sup>20</sup> Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, March 22, 1883.

<sup>21</sup> Kingsbury, Op.cit., p. 1301.



fully worked out on paper by Aleck McKenzie, who had been at the capitol a couple of weeks making the acquaintance of the Legislature, and who was the power behind the throne....<sup>22</sup>

McKenzie had evidently known of the plans for some time, because in 1882, one year before he made his move, he and a man named Collin purchased from Colonel C. B. Lamborn, land commissioner of the Northern Pacific, 160 acres of land one mile north of Bismarck for \$50,000. This, according to the Grand Forks Plaindealer, was "very valuable property."<sup>23</sup> Very likely this was the same piece of land upon which the capitol now rests. If not, it was near enough to the present capitol grounds to have enabled the owners to realize a handsome profit from their venture.\*

The Bismarck sheriff was not a delegate to the 1883 legislature. He came as an observer, and there he showed his ability as an organizer, and his capacity for intrigue. He had the support of the Northern Pacific to move the capitol to Bismarck. McKenzie knew that if the decision were left to the legislature, or to the people of the territory, Bismarck would not have any better chance than any other city. He acted accordingly. He wanted a commission appointed to select the site, and waited until the final hours of the session to make his move. J. O. B. Scobey, chairman of the session, was in on McKenzie's scheme and helped defeat a rider on the commission bill which would have provided for a vote of the people to approve the actions of the commission.

The bill was passed February 28, 1883. Governor Ordway

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 1370.

<sup>23</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, December 21, 1882.

\*This is merely popular assumption, as there is some doubt as to the exact location of the piece of land described.



signed it into law March 8. The new law named the commission members, and instructed them to "select the seat of government of the Territory of Dakota...." Cities were to bid for the capitol; the minimum bid was set at \$100,000 and 160 acres of land. A storm of protest arose. To pacify the objectors the commission members planned a "junket" to every town offering a bid.<sup>24</sup>

The commission members were: George A. Mathews of Brookings, M. B. Thompson of Vermillion, Burleigh F. Spalding, the Fargo attorney, Charles H. Meyers of Redfield, Henry H. deLong of Canton, Milo F. Scott of Grand Forks, Captain John P. Belding of Deadwood, Captain, (later General) Alexander Hughes of Yankton, and Alexander McKenzie of Bismarck.<sup>25</sup>

"At Canton an executive committee, of which Alex McKenzie was made chairman, was appointed to advertise for and receive bids for the capitol location."<sup>26</sup> The commission law required the members to meet and organize in Yankton before April 7, 1883. Yankton residents made ready to refuse them entrance. The houses of Governor Ordway and Commissioner Hughes were watched closely.<sup>27</sup> McKenzie was more than equal to the occasion, and he intended to have the commission fulfill the law to the letter. The canny Scot knew that his commission could not meet openly in Yankton because of the opposition of the people, but he was determined to to have the members meet there.

---

<sup>24</sup>Merle Potter, "The North Dakota Capitol Fight," North Dakota Historical Quarterly V. VII, (October, 1932) p. 28.

<sup>25</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, April 12, 1883.

<sup>26</sup>Lewis Crawford, History of North Dakota (New York, 1931), Vol. I, p. 349.

<sup>27</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, April 12, 1883.



Through his railroad connections Big Alec secured a train which would pick up the commission members before entering Yankton. At 3 A.M., April 3, 1883, the men boarded the train, and the engineer, a man named Moriarity, slowly pulled the train into Yankton while the populace slept. At 5:15 A.M. Hughes called the meeting to order; they had just entered the city limits of Yankton. In the ensuing minutes Hughes was elected permanent president; Ralph W. Wheelock, not a commission member but a Mitchell newspaperman, was named permanent secretary; and Scott was named permanent treasurer. According to the law creating the commission, all officers except the secretary were to be members of the commission. As the train slowly passed out of Yankton, the meeting was adjourned until 2 P.M. in Canton.<sup>28</sup> The agile brain of the "Bismarck Boomer," as McKenzie was sometimes called, had outwitted the people at every turn, and his plan to make Bismarck capitol of the Territory was succeeding without too much difficulty.

Bids came to the commission so rapidly, and were of such a generous and insistent nature, that the commission was forced to continually revamp their schedule of stops. Aberdeen, Canton, Frankfort, Huron, Mitchell and Steele all offered \$100,000 and 160 acres of land; Pierre bid \$100,000 and 250 acres; Redfield, 240 acres and \$100,000; Jamestown came forward with \$100,000 and \$5,000 in land; Ordway, named after the governor, put up 320 acres, \$100,000, and 160 acres of land for a railroad; Odessa bid \$200,000 and 160 acres; and Bismarck's tender was \$100,000 and 320 acres.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, April 12, 1883.

<sup>29</sup>Reedy, op. cit., p. 59.



Hughes was bitterly attacked by his Yankton friends. He had great influence in the Territory, and his friends at home thought that he could effect a turning in favor of Yankton, although the law specified that the capitol could not remain there. He held three important positions at this time: president of the capitol commission, receiver of the Yankton land office, and territorial attorney-general.<sup>30</sup>

At every stop along their route the commission members were royally received and great effort was made to impress them with the desirability of locating the capitol in the town visited. Many people believed though, that despite the commission's show of openmindedness, they had already decided on the site for the new capitol. The general opinion was that "the commission is governed by geographic considerations... the location[is] to be on the Missouri River."<sup>31</sup>

Fargo was selected as the voting place, and early in June the commission met there "in the Keeney block on North Broadway, then the finest structure in the city. It is now [1922] the Continental Hotel."<sup>32</sup> Seven ballots were needed before Bismarck received the majority vote.<sup>33</sup> On the first ballot McKenzie was the only member voting for Bismarck. On the seventh, McKenzie, Hughes, Belding, Scott and deLong voted for Bismarck, Mathews selected Huron, Thompson cast his ballot for Mitchell, and Meyers

---

<sup>30</sup>Kingsbury, op. cit., p. 1304.

<sup>31</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, May 10, 1883.

<sup>32</sup>Fargo Forum, June 23, 1922.

<sup>33</sup>Potter, "North Dakota Capitol Fight", loc. cit., p. 34.



and Spalding voted for Redfield.<sup>34</sup>

Another storm of protest rose at first, as the opponents of the commission in general, and of McKenzie in particular, felt strengthened in their earlier assertions that the deal was fixed by Big Alec. Bruce Nelson, in his recent book, wrote:

Actually, of course, this whole procedure was a farce, but so successful were the Boss' [McKenzie's] tactics that by the time Bismarck was named most of the sting of defeat was removed for the losing cities by the comforting thought that their rival neighbor had lost too.<sup>35</sup>

The boom which followed the selection of the new capitol swept many men into the ranks of the wealthy. Real estate prices rose above an already record high. The Milwaukee and Northwestern Railroad was due in Bismarck that year. It was said that a syndicate of Minneapolis, Stillwater and Brainerd speculators cleared \$200,000 on Bismarck city lots.<sup>36</sup> There can be little doubt that the secret had leaked out and that many shrewd gamblers had bet on this "sure thing." Citizens of the new capitol city who already had holdings were also depending upon the aptness of their man McKenzie to see that Bismarck was chosen. In a story years later the Fargo Forum commented:

McKenzie's coup was followed by a spectacular boom in Bismarck, a boom that was short lived. At its height the owner of a 25 foot lot on which there was constructed a mere shack refused \$22,000 for his holdings, although the lot in question was located three blocks west of the present site of the McKenzie Hotel [now the Patterson Hotel] in Bismarck.<sup>37</sup>

Reflections were quickly voiced concerning the future of

<sup>34</sup>Reedy, op.cit., p. 59.

<sup>35</sup>Nelson, op.cit., p. 132.

<sup>36</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, June 14, 1883.

<sup>37</sup>Fargo Forum, June 23, 1922.



the territory. Many men thought that the northern section would want separation, but the Grand Forks Plaindealer suggested:

"Bismarck will oppose Territorial division, to be capitol of the whole state is what she wants."<sup>38</sup>

The Boss' stock naturally rose, especially in the eyes of his neighbors and friends in Bismarck. That cities sentiments were expressed in the Bismarck Tribune thus:

We trusted in our magnificent country; the excellence of our location; the size of our bid (320 acres of land and \$100,000); the integrity of the commission, and in God; and last, but by no means least, in the pluck and discretion of Alexander McKenzie. To him we owe all honor. His name even was a tower of strength, and in all North Dakota no man could have better planned or better executed the work in hand. Those who knew him best knew he would not fail. He never fails!<sup>39</sup>

This was not the last activity of the commission. Shortly after Bismarck was named Territorial capitol, several Fargo business men filed a protest in the courts on the commission's actions. They claimed that the capitol removal law was invalid, and that the selection of a new capitol must be made by the governor and the legislative assembly. Furthermore, they maintained that the legislature could not legally give the commission the power to move the capitol.

This was plainly an act of acute jealousy and frustration on the part of the Fargo men. Fargo was the largest and busiest town in the Territory, and had the best rail connections. Thus, they believed that Fargo should have been selected.

On August 27, 1883, Chief Justice Edgerton of Yankton handed down a decision which encouraged the Fargo people.

---

<sup>38</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, June 14, 1883.

<sup>39</sup>Reedy, loc.cit.



He ruled:

...that such defendants, and each of them be and they are hereby forever ousted and excluded from said office of commissioners mentioned in said action in the complaint described, and from all franchise and privileges made, enumerated and included therein.<sup>40</sup>

In spite of this early court success, the commission was too powerful for the Fargo group. Led by McKenzie, they immediately appealed the case. There was no question but that they were acting according to the law and at the direction of the governor and the legislature. The Supreme Court of the Territory reversed Edgerton's decision, he only dissenting. The court said that in their opinion "the appellants were lawfully entitled to exercise the duties of their appointments under the act in question."<sup>41</sup> That there were powerful forces working against Alex and his commissioners is indicated by Edgerton's action. It is the custom for a Supreme Court Justice, if he has had previous connection with a case, to exclude himself from the deliberations when the case reaches the higher court. Edgerton did not, and probably had a strong motive for not doing so.

This action of the Supreme Court unified the people of northern Dakota, and those in the south were not satisfied and increased their efforts for division.<sup>42</sup> There had been talk of division of the territory for some time. The political leaders of the north were still split over the commission's action, and the more conscientious of them believed that McKenzie had pulled off a political coup which they were now powerless to stop, giving

---

<sup>40</sup>Clement A. Lounsberry, Early History of North Dakota (Bismarck, 1919), p. 371.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.



Big Alec great influence and power.

Among the men opposed to McKenzie, not only over the capitol removal "deal" but also throughout the Scot's political career, was George B. Winship of Grand Forks; founder of the Grand Forks Herald. Winship's story of McKenzie's attempt to solidify the north during the 1883 Territorial convention of the Republican party follows:

The principle political issue in the territory that year [1883] was the unpopular work of the capitol commission [in] the year previous [sic]. There were three political subdivisions in the territory; the north, and south and Black Hills. In all these districts were strong opponents of the capitol commission coterie, which was led by Alex McKenzie, and whose desire was to solidify the northern delegates. Pettigrew led the anti-McKenzie element in the south and Frank Washabaugh the Black Hills pretesters [sic].

Pettigrew and Ordway had been at odds from the start of the governor's administration, so when Ordway allied himself with the McKenzie faction, Pettigrew had no choice but to oppose the capitol movers, if for no other reason than his antipathy towards his old enemy. Winship's narrative goes on:

The opposition in the north centered in [the] Grand Forks delegation of which I was the nominal head. In sympathy with our cause, also, were all [of] the delegates from Richland, Traill and Walsh counties, and a major part of the delegation from Cass and Pembina counties the whole constituting a majority of the representatives of the Red river Valley.

There were two delegations from Grand Forks; the second was led by George A. Walsh, founder of the Plaindealer. Neither delegation was strong enough alone to force its own recognition. It seems only natural that the delegates from the Red River Valley should oppose McKenzie and his capitol movers. Fargo and Bismarck represented the two centers of the northern area. They were then rivals politically, economically, and socially, and still are. The



Great Northern had reached Grand Forks in 1882, and the upper part of the valley was rapidly filling with settlers from the south, east and north. The Winship account continues:

None of these delegates had axes to grind, or personal ambitions to gratify; their only issue was the recognition by the convention of the Grand Forks delegation headed by me. Being conversant with our local situation and the designs of the McKenzie-Walsh-capitol commission, they did not hesitate to array themselves on our side. McKenzie quickly grasped the situation at the outset. He saw that our delegation held the key to the northern combination, and without it's cooperation his work of solidifying the north would be futile. With this dilemma confronting him, on the arrival of our delegation, McKenzie quickly sought [sic] me out and began a line of procedure that did not terminate for several hours. I had never met McKenzie before. His political record as sheriff of Burleigh county and as chairman of the capitol commission was familiar to me, but I knew nothing of his personality. He was introduced by Major Edwards, and three minutes afterwards his brawny right arm encircled my body and I was fairly lifted out of the crowd of delegates and hustled to a more secluded environment.

Major A. W. Edwards was owner and founder of the Fargo Forum. He also was a political enemy of McKenzie, and was probably eager to see how the two personalities clashed. Weighing almost 300 pounds, Edwards, by force of his keen intellect and great ambition, had made his paper into one of the most influential in the territory. Winship relates his confidential talk with McKenzie in these words:

We walked down the newly graded street, turned and sauntered up another, then out on the prairie a ways, and then back to the place from which we started. McKenzie you know was a resourceful fellow. He approached his victim according to his estimate of their personal characteristics [sic]. Persuasion, supplication, and intimidation are resorted to in the order of the necessities of the occasion. All of these arts--he worked on me during our stroll on the streets of Huron that beautiful April day.

In 1879 Winship had founded the Grand Forks Herald which was exercising considerable influence in the north-east section



of the territory. McKenzie realized the advantages which would accompany Winship's help on political matters. In 1875 the Grand Forks Plaindealer had begun publication, and the two papers were opposed on most important issues. Lounsberry, in his Early History of North Dakota, writes that the Herald took the Plaindealer over within a few years after Winship began publishing.<sup>43</sup> There is another story which has Walsh selling his paper to N. W. Spangler in 1876, just two years after the first issue. The Winship narrative runs on:

"Winship," said McKenzie, "I am glad to meet you. I have heard much about you and have desired for a long time to meet you in person. You are putting up quite a scrap there in Grand Forks county and your paper is read by everyone. Your views are generally right, but sometimes you go astray. Just now it is very important that you persist in injecting your local troubles into territorial politics. It disorganizes us fellows in the north, when we should stand together and overcome the southern bosses. You are a good fellow, and all the boys like you; but they regret that you did not know where your real friends are. Walsh has stood by us in our capitol fight, and we are going to stand by him; although he has not delivered the delegates in this convention that we expected of him. I guess he has made a mess of it up in your country. Now if you want to do the sensible thing and make yourself solid with the boys, just drop your contest and we will split even with you--give you four delegates and Walsh four; besides putting you in line for something good in the future."

In substance these were McKenzie's opening remarks, which were couched in most persuasive language, and in tones sympathetic and appealing. His hand rested carressingly on my shoulder and occasionally my knees were affectionately stroked after the manner of stroking the fur of a cat with whom you desire friendly relations.

Winship told McKenzie that the Grand Forks delegation wanted full recognition and not half-way measures. McKenzie immediately changed, and in harsh tones said:

"I was in hopes that you would take a sensible course in

---

<sup>43</sup>Lounsberry, op. cit., p. 377-8.



this matter, that the north would be united, and that we could all go home friends, as well as victors. But if you are determined to be a disorganizer and persist in helping the south break and dominate the north, why you must take the consequences. It is evident you do not know the peril you are in--I mean in a business way. You have antagonized Governor Ordway, and he will fight you without mercy. He is a millionaire, and a free spender and I know as a fact that he contemplates starting a rival paper in Grand Forks for the purpose of putting you out of business. He has been dissuaded from doing this heretofore, because we assured him that you were alright and would cooperate with us when you fully understood the situation. If you fail on this occasion to do the right thing, we cannot restrain the old man any longer.<sup>44</sup>

In spite of this threat Winship refused to consent to the deal, and McKenzie became more cool. He said that Winship would be forced to suffer the consequences of his action. Ordway never did start a rival paper in Grand Forks; he went out of office in 1884.

McKenzie changed his tactics after this talk, and he succeeded in his plan for the convention. He dropped Walsh and seated Winship's delegation. Winship opposed the manner in which his delegation was handled, but they stuck with McKenzie. He took the seated delegates away from Winship, who used all of his remaining influence to overthrow the McKenzie forces. He actively joined with the southern Pettigrew faction, but McKenzie was too strong. After hours of debate and confusion, two delegates to the national Republican convention were elected: N. E. Nelson and John L. Jolly, and the territorial executive committee was appointed. McKenzie had won, and he controlled the convention.<sup>45</sup>

McKenzie was a young man, only 33, at the time of this

---

<sup>44</sup>Personal letter from George B. Winship, early Grand Forks resident, and delegation leader to the 1883 territorial convention of the Republican party, published in the Grand Forks Herald, June 23, 1922.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.



victory. Already he had acquired through his experiences and the development of his abilities an air of magnetic authority which would bind to him a small but influential band of followers. Now a powerful figure, he was embarked upon a remarkable career, the like of which has not been recorded since in North Dakota's history.

His sagacity in handling the naming of the commissioners; his boldness in having Hughes, a resident of Yankton, elected to head the commission; the dash and imagination which went into the organization in Yankton; all showed his great leadership. But the fact that he kept himself comparatively in the background showed somewhat his humility, and his desire not to gain personal glory, but to do what he thought was right and proper.



## CHAPTER II

### THE EMPIRE BUILDER 1883-1900

Performance was the keynote of success in the early days of Dakota Territory, just as it is today. The "Big Scotchman" with the ready smile and the firm handshake had captured the imagination of the people. They were not all friendly to McKenzie by any means, but they must have admired him, however grudgingly. McKenzie "became the most conspicuous citizen and celebrated character in the Territory of Dakota before it had run completely its Territorial course."<sup>1</sup> Alec, who had been well regarded in Bismarck before the 1883 capitol coup, was now known throughout the territory as the "versatile genius of his time and one of the most conspicuous characters in Dakota..."<sup>2</sup> Reflections on his character, morals, business activities and even religious beliefs led, in some cases, to condemnation, but more often to praise. Writing of the Scot's victory in the capitol removal fight, Kingsbury commented: "He, the bright, companionable fellow, personally, who had never been credited with such a thing as scruples, may be said to have been without any moral responsibility in the matter."<sup>3</sup>

The "Boss" had many friends and many enemies, but to all he was a symbol of manhood, strength, and mental prowess. As Kingsbury put it:

There is not a political or "public" enemy, to adapt a word to my meaning, against whom Aleck McKenzie finds himself arrayed, who stands without the pale of the adroit chieftain's speaking acquaintance. He can slap them all on

---

<sup>1</sup>Kingsbury, History of Dakota Territory, p. 1369.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



the shoulder...one fancies that some of the virtuous innocents from South Dakota, who now and then get taken in, secretly wish, at the bottom of their hearts, that there were only more chiefs like him--like the merry, merry Modoc in the land of the Dakotahs.... What is the secret of his success? Ah, there are more secrets than one, and it must be admitted that they are for the most part open ones. In the first place, Aleck McKenzie is, "Personally" a man you would like. Tall, broad shouldered, and of full proportions, with light sandy hair and mustache, and the round, ruddy face of the good-humored Scotchman, Alexander the Great, of the North, is everybody's friend on principle.<sup>4</sup>

The constant reference to the "personally" angle in some of the accounts of the day relating to McKenzie might indicate somewhat of a two-sided character. Alec had a charming personality. He seemed to have gained many devoted friends and followers solely by the force of his affable exterior. This was in spite of ruthless and over-powering action when participating in other than friendly encounters. Men may not have cared for his political morals and methods, but they evidently consented to "personal" charm and demeanor.

The extent of his influence is difficult to determine exactly, but some evidence is given by Kingsbury: "Although McKenzie is a democrat 'personally' and although Dakota is practically a Republican unit, it remains a fact, all the same, that McKenzie is the chief engineer, whenever he wants to be, of the domestic affairs of both parties."<sup>5</sup> Many writers supported this belief. Nelson wrote: "McKenzie, more than any other single man, was responsible for the development and early growth of Dakota."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Kingsbury, op. cit., p. 1370.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Nelson, Land of the Dakotahs, p. 128.



Lounsberry stated that Alexander McKenzie of Bismarck was "the most prominent and influential citizen of North Dakota in the construction period of its existence."<sup>7</sup>

What was the driving force behind this man? Was it greed, a lust for power, natural ambition? Was he desirous of personal glory? Or did he leap at the prospect of battle in which he could use his strongest weapon, his personality, to best advantage? Lounsberry supplies part of the answer: "Whatever may be said of him it must be said that he has never used his political powers for his own advantage either financially or politically."<sup>8</sup>

After firmly seating himself in the political driver's seat in the Territory, Alec turned to other and broader things. He was elected national committeeman of the Republican party from North Dakota. He held this position until 1912 when James Kennedy of Fargo succeeded him.<sup>9</sup>

He was instrumental in 1883 in having the penitentiary built in Bismarck instead of in Fargo.<sup>10</sup> On September 8, 1883, the cornerstone of the capitol building was laid in Bismarck. McKenzie did much of the planning which went into the occasion. "Major" James McLaughlin, the Standing Rock Indian Reservation agent, brought Sitting Bull, Gall, and several other well known Indians and their followers to the event.<sup>11</sup> McLaughlin had been agent for

<sup>7</sup>Lounsberry, Early History of North Dakota, p. 497.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, March 1, 1883.

<sup>11</sup>Lounsberry, op. cit., p. 421.



several years, and was quite a controversial figure in the Territory. He undoubtedly rendered great service to his charges, but his methods and motives were often questioned.

McKenzie greatly appreciated the value of appearance and show. His own great stature and fine, lion-like carriage undoubtedly was the cause of much of his success. His love for the unusual and the dramatic expressed itself in many of his acts. In 1880 he took a trainload of products from the fertile soil of the Territory east to Minneapolis, where he put them on exhibition. In 1884 he managed a similar stunt, only with more pomp and ceremony. He obtained permission from the government to take Chief Gall, of Little Big Horn fame, and other chiefs of the Standing Rock Reservation to the New Orleans Worlds Fair Exposition.<sup>12</sup> He even spent his own money and was never reimbursed.<sup>13</sup> With the trainload of Indians he carried samples of Dakota products and advertised the Territory far and wide. He did not win first prize on this venture as he had at the earlier show, but he probably put on an exhibition spectators remembered for a long time. Passenger cars of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad were used. Two months before the New Orleans trip Alec and the exhibit visited Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, New York, parts of Pennsylvania and New England, and eastern Canada.<sup>14</sup> The seats of the cars were removed and shelves erected for convenient and colorful display of the goods. The announcement on the sides of the cars

---

<sup>12</sup>Fargo Forum, June 22, 1922.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Kingsbury, op. cit., p. 1370-75.



was: "Samples of Dakota Products, Along the Line of Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway."<sup>15</sup> Expectation of statehood led to the painting of a large "39" on the engine's headlight, in anticipation of becoming the thirty-ninth state of the union.<sup>16</sup> The Territory was actually split into the fortieth and forty-first states. It is not certain that McKenzie either supported or opposed division of the Territory, or that he threw his full weight behind the drive for statehood.

McKenzie was a man of means as a result of his many enterprises. He was one of the directors of the Bismarck National Bank, as were George P. Flannery, later the Scot's law advisor, Frank J. Call, J. W. Raymond and others. The bank boasted \$50,000 in capital and \$20,000 in surplus and undivided profits in 1886,<sup>17</sup> the year McKenzie laid down the burden of the office of sheriff.<sup>18</sup> He could have stayed in office. The Bismarck Tribune commented: "no better, truer man can be found than the man who now, voluntarily and heartily, consigns the office of sheriff to the choice of the people of this county today."<sup>19</sup>

Alec resigned the office of sheriff so that he might devote more time to the ever-growing responsibility of his high position in territorial politics. He became the solid citizen. He had lived on Maine Avenue, between 5th and 6th streets in Bismarck, but in 1884 he built a big frame house at 722 5th street.

---

<sup>15</sup>Kingsbury, op. cit. p. 1370-75.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Bismarck Tribune, July 17, 1886.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., November 2, 1886.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.



Peter Wilcox, quoted in the Bismarck Capitol, said that when McKenzie built the house it was out of the then small town.<sup>20</sup> The house has since had many owners. It was bought by the congregation of the Zion Lutheran Church within the last few years, and purchased later by Eddie Agre who moved it to upper 4th Street west of the capitol, where it now stands, visible from the steps of the Statehouse. A Judge Bartholomew lived in the house after the McKenzie family left Bismarck. It was also the Miller Sanitarium at one time.<sup>21</sup> The house is said to have fourteen gables.<sup>22</sup> It is a splendid structure, and probably indicative of the stature and prominence of its first owner. One source describes the building as "a large white frame house built in the indeterminate, unpedigreed style typical of North Dakota's architecture of the nineties. The house remains unchanged from the days when it was the home of Alexander McKenzie (1856-1922) [sic], spectacular figure of early Bismarck and State history, master politician, ally of the railroads."<sup>23</sup>

The "Boss'" relations with Governor Ordway deteriorated rapidly after the capitol removal affair. Ordway had expected big things in a personal way from the rampant Scotchman, but he had been outplayed at his own game and left holding the reins of government in a city completely dominated by his former ally and underling.<sup>24</sup> During Ordway's administration many schemes of his,

---

<sup>20</sup>Bismarck Capitol, August 1, 1947.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Mrs. Florence H. Davis.

<sup>23</sup>North Dakota Federal Writers' Project, North Dakota, A Guide To The Northern Prairie State (Fargo, 1938), p. 124.

<sup>24</sup>From an undated newspaper clipping in the scrapbook of Mrs. Fred J. Graham of Ellendale, North Dakota.



as well as his family's, had earned the dislike of the people. They knew they were being milked by the Territorial politicians. No successful action was taken against the men around McKenzie, but Ordway, lacking the finesse and composure of his young nemesis, was brought to account late in his term. In April 1884, Ordway was indicted by a Federal Grand Jury for alleged complicity in fraud in the organization of Faulk county. The accusation was "asking for and receiving bribes as a United States official in connection with organization of Faulk county."<sup>25</sup> Ordway "was placed under \$10,000 bonds [sic] and a Vermillion banker and Alex McKenzie were secured to serve as his bondsmen."<sup>26</sup> That is evidently the only aid Alec extended to Ordway when he was in dire distress. The indictment was quashed by the presiding judge in the trial because the Grand Jury had no jurisdiction over Ordway as a Territorial executive in the conduct of his office. Ordway should have insisted on a trial in order to prove his innocence. He was later discharged from his appointed office by Washington officials as a direct result of the matter.<sup>27</sup> Kingsbury wrote that Ordway was not interested in Dakota and did little for the territory. Ordway's acts did not gain him many friends, and only stirred up hatred against himself and his family. Kingsbury charged that Ordway "started banks where he could make gains from the industries of the people."<sup>28</sup>

After much toil and argument, the state of North Dakota

---

<sup>25</sup>Reedy, Administration of Nehemiah G. Ordway, p. 77.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Kingsbury, op. cit., p. 1380.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 1382.



was recognized as such by the Congress. On July 4, 1889, the new state had its first constitutional convention in Bismarck. McKenzie had a major part in the organization of the event.<sup>29</sup> The political question of the day was evidently division. Of the short period prior to the actual attainment of statehood, Kingsbury commented: "All political parties at home in Dakota may with truth be said to have been united for division (into two states)...."<sup>30</sup> McKenzie became the republican leader of the new state and it was in the "last decade of [the] 19th century that McKenzie was at the height of his power..."<sup>31</sup> His program was irresistible to the extent of only "one reverse in 1892, when E. C. Shortridge was swept into power on the populist wave...with this exception all the governors of North Dakota from the admission of the state to the union in 1889 until 1906 were members of Mr. McKenzie's party."<sup>32</sup>

James J. Hill of the Great Northern Railroad once asked George B. Winship, "Why don't you send your biggest man, Aleck McKenzie, to the United States Senate?" "Because he won't have it," answered Winship, who was seldom in political agreement with McKenzie.<sup>33</sup>

The burly Scotchman never allowed pictures of himself to be published, but one, appearing in the Fargo Forum, showed him in 1890 to be tall, rawboned, and of massive frame. His was a lion-like head with bushy, prominent eye-brows and a long, full, Roman

---

<sup>29</sup>Lounsberry, op. cit., p. 421.

<sup>30</sup>Kingsbury, op. cit., p. 1598.

<sup>31</sup>Grand Forks Herald, June 23, 1922.

<sup>32</sup>Grand Forks Herald, June 23, 1922.

<sup>33</sup>William B. Hennessy, History of North Dakota (Bismarck, 1910), p. 628.



nose. His sideburns were cut short, and the hair receded slightly along the temples, although his hair was exceedingly heavy. His high forehead, strong dark eyes and firm chin were set off by a heavy mustache. He had a foreful, strong, well-fed appearance.<sup>34</sup>

As is the fate of all men who attain prominence and renown, McKenzie had his bitter enemies. He had put his hand upon the politics of other states and other leaders. His name was probably as familiar in St. Paul as in Fargo, as he and his closest friends and advisors spent considerable time in the Twin Cities, usually on political business.

Conde Hamlin, a young reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, wrote an article alleging certain acts on the part of the North Dakota boss and his friends. The big Scot found Hamlin in the Sheridan House where McKenzie and his friends were visiting. "I want to see you—why did you lie about me and my friends for in the 'Pioneer Press?'" asked McKenzie of Hamlin. Wordless, the reporter pulled a gun from his pocket. Alec promptly took it away from him, backed the youth into a corner and then asked the crowd to let him handle the man. The Scot spoke a few words to the young man, handed him his gun and said: "Take you gun—shoot me if you want too—I'm a man." Hamlin pocketed the gun and offered to shake McKenzie's hand, but Alec refused, although he kept the crowd away from the would-be assassin, saying, "Keep back, let him go his way."<sup>35</sup> Hamlin, and indeed many others like him, feared the husky politician because of previous actions and words.

---

<sup>34</sup>Fargo Forum, October 13, 1946.

<sup>35</sup>Bismarck Tribune, March 15, 1890.



McKenzie's interest and business in St. Paul was closely connected with his rule in North Dakota. Undoubtedly much of his financial support came from the wealthy businessmen and speculators of that city. One authority states:

The railroads and financial interests of St. Paul and Minneapolis had very early begun interfering in North Dakota politics. Judson LaMoure and Alexander McKenzie were the lords of this era, both representing railroad interests in State politics, and the favors they were able to bestow were a safeguard against legislation hostile to the companies.<sup>36</sup>

The giant Scot had other enterprises. Besides banking, his mining interests in British Columbia, took much of his time. But North Dakota politics were his primary business.<sup>37</sup> In those activities McKenzie's closest friend and associate was John Haggart. Haggart was United States marshall when McKenzie was deputy marshall and sheriff of Burleigh county. Haggart's son, Gilbert Haggart who now lives in Fargo, was also a great friend of the amiable Scot. The deals which these men supposedly hatched in the Twin Cities drew much condemnation. The Grand Forks Plaindealer was one of the chief critics. In commenting on these alleged actions, that paper stated:

If those things had happened under the administration of President Cleveland, those same owl faced, hypocritical misfits in journalism [republican papers] would have been yelling themselves hoarse and demanding an investigation ....but under the benign rule of Alex McKenzie and Hans [Henry C. Hansbrough] in North Dakota anything goes.<sup>38</sup>

Further vilification was heaped upon the "Boss'" head. The Plaindealer commented later: "To prove that he is a resident

<sup>36</sup>North Dakota Federal Writer's Project, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup>Bismarck Tribune, May 4, 1895.

<sup>38</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, December 1, 1898.



of Bismarck and not a Wall Street emissary Alex McKenzie talks of building a hotel in Bismarck."<sup>39</sup> That same paper averred that McKenzie's interest in North Dakota centered only on the period just preceding a senatorial election.<sup>40</sup>

The clash of personalities became more evident and bitter after North Dakota became a state. Senators and representatives were to be elected, and therein lay most of the power of the individual politician. McKenzie usually controlled the state's delegates in both houses in Washington, but there was much questioning of his value to the state. The Plaindealer announced that: "Colonel Streeter of the Emmons County Record said that Alex McKenzie has done more for the state than a hundred Winships and Carruths. Wow!"<sup>41</sup> It must be remembered that, although the Plaindealer's original owners had been favorable to McKenzie, the new owners were not. Very probably they were influenced by Winship and his powerful paper, the Grand Forks Herald.

Party lines began to be defined in more and more understandable terms. McKenzie controlled the state Republicans almost all of the time, and the Democrats some of the time, but violent opposition existed at all times in both parties. The Plaindealer reported that B. O. Schaering of Mayville Township had written:

I, for one at least, dislike representatives to disgrace themselves by entering into an agreement with Alex McKenzie not to vote for M. N. Johnson...If they must vote for a republican, let them not allow themselves to be used as tools of Alex McKenzie and the Bismarck corrupt gang.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, December 8, 1898.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., December 15, 1898.

<sup>42</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, January 12, 1899.



This was in connection with the 1899 campaign for one North Dakota seat in the United States Senate.

There were many men in the state Republican party who wished the defeat of the Scot and of all he represented. In this 1899 campaign McKenzie was troubled with dissension in the ranks. The Plaindealer advertised, hopefully no doubt, that McKenzie was worried over the situation. The Scot supported Clarence B. Little of Bismarck for nomination as the candidate most likely to be elected in the congressional election, and opposed the nomination of Martin N. Johnson of Petersburg, then a representative from North Dakota. The Plaindealer stated that McKenzie supported Little because he was very pliable.<sup>43</sup> The enemies of the "Boss" said that he knew Johnson could and would destroy his machine if elected. It had evidently been a long time since the power of the Scotchman had been challenged, for this campaign caused more controversy than had those previously. It was said that the plan of the McKenzie forces was to defeat Johnson first, and then elect their choice.<sup>44</sup>

The first telling blow in the race was delivered by McKenzie when he raised doubt as to whether Johnson had "influence with the McKinley administration or not."<sup>45</sup> Alec had previously attempted to force a caucus of the party before Johnson's supporters had made their preparations, but he failed.<sup>46</sup> Little ran a poor third<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, January 12, 1899.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.



and fourth<sup>48</sup> to Johnson in the opening votes at the convention in Bismarck. The nomination was not going as it should in the minds of McKenzie's followers. The novel existence of a rift in the McKenzie ranks was the chief cause of the lack of power. Porter J. McCumber, of Wahpeton, Jud LaMoure, and others in McKenzie's group were also running for the nomination, and this lack of cooperation aided the other main faction immeasurably.<sup>49</sup> In the final minutes of the convention the able Alec made a "deal." McCumber had strong support, so McKenzie dropped Little and threw his weight behind the Wahpeton man. LaMoure dropped from the race when the "Boss" sacrificed his first choice. On the deciding vote McCumber was nominated. The credit for defeating Johnson was given to McKenzie, but LaMoure received the palm for nominating McCumber.<sup>50</sup>

Porter J. McCumber was not a dynamic man. He was a staunch party wheelhorse, and on most issues a close follower of Big Alec.<sup>51</sup> Along with Henry C. Hansbrough he was United States Senator from North Dakota for many years. McCumber served until 1923, when he was defeated by Lynn J. Frazier of Hoople, later governor of North Dakota. Hansbrough, elected to the national house in 1889, was sent to the Senate in 1891 where he remained until 1909.

The big news following the nomination was that Alec was sick and bedridden. He had gone into the struggle an ailing man

---

<sup>48</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, January 19, 1899.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., January 26, 1899.

<sup>51</sup>Personal interview with Fred Goodman of Grand Forks, July 3, 1948. Mr. Goodman came to this area in 1872 when the Great Northern Railroad reached this city. He is now connected with the Northwestern Trust Company.



but would not stay away from such an important fight.<sup>52</sup> McKenzie was later taken to a St. Paul hospital. The "Political King of North Dakota"<sup>53</sup> soon regained his vigor and energetically lobbied against a proposed tax on state telegraph, telephone, and railroad lines.<sup>54</sup>

The turn of the century found the "Boss" at the height of his political power. His greatest adventure lay before him, but he had already made an impression upon the history of his state which was not soon forgotten by those witnessing his unending victories. He had helped establish the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks, the Agricultural College at Fargo, the State Penitentiary at Bismarck, and several other state institutions. He had put North Dakota on the political map. Neither he nor his followers were conservative. The men who came after him in control of state politics had innumerable outside problems to face, but it is doubtful if so much opposition against one man, or one ideal, has been injected into political circles of the state since the reign of the big, ruddy-faced McKenzie. With the turn of the century, Alec tried his hand in other fields. The lust for adventure in far places, for daring exploits, and for power was in his veins; he was fifty, yet vigorous in mind and body.

---

<sup>52</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, January 26, 1899.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., March 16, 1899.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.



### CHAPTER III

#### ALASKA ADVENTURE (1900-01)

By 1900 Alec had finished buying the rights of persons making counterclaims to Alaska gold mines. He called the holdings The Alaska Gold Mining Company. McKenzie held most of the stock in the \$15,000,000 corporation.<sup>1</sup> Alec had plans for action and adventure in the then mysterious and forbidding land of Alaska. The men he gathered around him were able, relatively unscrupulous, and devoted to the Scotchman. Chief among these was Judge Arthur H. Noyes, of Grand Forks, who had all but completed a long and successful law career when he was appointed to a Federal District judgeship in Alaska. His mind and body had deteriorated considerably, and McKenzie had little trouble in convincing him of the attractiveness of the Alaska scheme. Noyes was to appoint Alec receiver of the disputed mines.<sup>2</sup>

Rex Beach wrote a novel, The Spoilers, (1906) about McKenzie's activities in Alaska. In it he cast R. N. Stevens, a Lisbon attorney and member of the State Constitutional Convention of 1889,<sup>3</sup> as the crafty attorney. Stevens accompanied Alec to Alaska. From the very outset the plan had opposition. Alaska's mining camps had never been under receivership before McKenzie and Noyes arrived.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The Federal Reporter (St. Paul, 1901), Vol, 106, p. 777.

<sup>2</sup>Mrs. Florence H. Davis.

<sup>3</sup>North Dakota Federal Writer's Project, North Dakota, A Guide To The Northern Prairie States. (Fargo, 1938), p. 305.

<sup>4</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, November 22, 1900.



In fact, Alaska Code #753 provided against appointment of a receiver in any action for recovery of property.<sup>5</sup>

The Spoilers portrays McKenzie as a suave, evil, and designing villain. This is not necessarily true. In the light of his past history, and in regard to the high opinion in which he was held by his associates and friends, it is difficult to judge. He was not entirely a devil, yet not much resembling an angel. Alaska hung off the lip of North America like a bag full of shiny new gold pieces, waiting for the right man to come along. Alec was that man.

McKenzie and his companions arrived in Alaska early in June, 1900. On June 23 Noyes appointed Alec receiver of certain mine claims. He was to take over, manage and work the mines, and dispose of all gold according to the orders of the court. Noyes also ordered those in possession of the mines to turn their positions over to McKenzie's men. Alec posted a \$5,000 bond for each of five of the richest mines in the Nome district. The Lane syndicate was in possession of the disputed mines and appealed the order. Noyes refused to honor their pleas, exercising his prerogative as district judge.<sup>6</sup> Noyes refused steadily to rule in favor of the ousted men in all points of law. McKenzie ruled the court.<sup>7</sup> His rule was called "a reign of terror."<sup>8</sup> McKenzie's men were accused of jumping claims and being upheld in court by Noyes.<sup>9</sup> The Black Chief Mining Company opposed McKenzie saying that the only need for a

<sup>5</sup>The Federal Reporter, p. 776.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Waldemar E. Lillo, "The Alaska Gold Mining Company and the Cape Nome Conspiracy," Unpublished Doctor's thesis of the University of North Dakota, August, 1935. Now in the library of the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota, p. 205.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 225.



receiver was in preservation of property and that was not the case here.<sup>10</sup> The power exercised by McKenzie was so great that he even got the army to guard the vaults in which he kept the gold dust, estimated at the most to be over a quarter of a million dollars.<sup>11</sup> The syndicate sent a man to San Francisco to the Circuit Court of Appeals in that city. The messenger returned with a writ of supersedeas from Judge W.W. Morrow. The writ ordered McKenzie to cease action and return all of the property and gold to the original possessors.<sup>12</sup> This action was described in very melodramatic terms by Beach in his novel. He had the McKenzie group all but kidnapping the messenger in an attempt to stave off court action. The book is a virile adventure story patterned after the taste of the reading public of the times, but McKenzie is put in an altogether unfair light. He was not living up to the strict code of ethics set up by the customs of the time, but whether he actually intended to oppose the United States government is open to question. He was too astute an individual to let himself be led into such a position, and he certainly would not knowingly build such an airtight case against himself as he evidently did.

McKenzie refused to honor the court order and continued to work the mines. Upon being informed of Alec's neglect, the San Francisco court sent a United States marshall to Nome. Before the marshall could arrest McKenzie he had to obtain the support of the local army commander, which he did after some persuasion and discussion.<sup>13</sup> He arrested McKenzie and took him to San Francisco to stand trial before the Circuit Court for contempt of that court. The Scot made no attempt to escape either before or after arrest.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Lillo, op. cit., p. 210.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> The Federal Reporter, p. 776.

<sup>13</sup> Lillo, op. cit., p. 257.

<sup>14</sup> The Federal Reporter, p. 777.



Arrested in December, 1900, McKenzie immediately began action to defend himself. Concerning this the Plaindealer, usually antagonistic to McKenzie, remarked:

Judge Noyes and Receiver Alex McKenzie are now the aggressors in forcing the Nome receivership investigation proceedings...so far the evidence submitted is very much in their favor. In fact there has been absolutely no evidence whatever given to prove the charges made by the Lane syndicate against them.<sup>15</sup>

Even while under the attacks of the Lane group in Nome and in the courts, McKenzie retained his nerve and confidence. One story is told of an incident in Alaska. Alec had gone into the Nome bank vault to look for some papers. When he came out he was confronted by a crowd led by one of the Lane group, who menaced Alec with a gun. Near by a brass band played. The leader said he had some papers to serve on Alec, which the Scot challenged him to produce. This was not done, so the husky McKenzie walked past the Lane man and shouldered his way through the crowd. McKenzie said later: "I did not have much time to think, but it flashed quickly through my mind that those fellows were not so dangerous as they looked. I had never before heard of a brass band at a killing."<sup>16</sup>

In San Francisco Alec and his advisors prepared his case. The rival claimants to the mines had suits in court, and McKenzie was tried in connection with the cases of Tornases v. Melsing et al and Kjellman v. Rogers.<sup>17</sup> Alec's defense was that Judge Noyes was within his rights in refusing an appeal to his receivership orders; that the orders to cease had not come from the court grant-in the original order; and that McKenzie had acted under advice from his legal counsel.

---

<sup>15</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, December 18, 1900.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., January 10, 1901.

<sup>17</sup>The Federal Reporter, p. 775.



The court heard with patience the arguments of McKenzie's counsels, Thomas J. Geary and A.C. Severance. Judge Gilbert Ross rendered the decision. He called the Scot's actions "deliberate, willful, and contumacious."<sup>18</sup> He said that McKenzie's defense was only a pretense, and that he was found guilty of contempt. Ross then reviewed the case which will bear repeating here. The judge said that the writ of supersedeas in question had referred to mines "No. 10 Above Discovery" and "No. 2 Below Discovery" on Anvil Creek. The order was dated September 14, 1900. After the court had issued the writ, Judge Noyes wrongfully refused the appeals of the injured mine owners. The court said that the action of taking over the mines was definitely appealable. Ross then cited cases in which the circuit court's ruling found precedent. The writ was filed with the Alaska district court, and there was no reason for McKenzie to resist the order of the court.<sup>19</sup>

Ross then sentenced the Scot and ordered that he "be imprisoned in the county jail of the County of Alameda, California for the period of six months"<sup>20</sup> on two counts; the total sentence equaled one year.

Comment on the outcome of the case varied, depending upon the political beliefs of those commenting. The Plaindealer reviewed the case and seemed to gloat over the outcome.<sup>21</sup>

McKenzie had previously settled out of court with the Lane syndicate. The value of the property which changed hands was said to be \$10,000,000. All of the rights in the Anvil and Dexter Creek mines were given to the Pioneer Mining Company. This settlement included \$430,000 in damages which Alec had

---

<sup>18</sup>The Federal Reporter, p. 775.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 779.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 780.

<sup>21</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, February 12, 1901.



supposedly caused. The Plaindealer reported that the Lane people were satisfied: " All charges made before the Attorney General and the President of the United States will be dropped and withdrawn; there will be no ground for the proposed congressional investigation."<sup>22</sup> This anti-McKenzie newspaper quipped about his being " unavoidably detained" in San Francisco, and that the North Dakota Republican party had better start looking for a new national committeeman.<sup>23</sup>

Many people, however, believed that Alec had been given a bad deal at the trial. Joe Detreich, a long-time friend of the Scot, said, " People all over North Dakota and especially on the Missouri slope do not believe that he was dealt a fair hand...at San Francisco..."<sup>24</sup>

Many followers of McKenzie believed that the incident had swelled the ranks of his adherents. Thus the Plaindealer was able to report that " The Press ...expresses the hope that some way can be found that will cut Alex's stay in prison short. This will not weaken McKenzie as a factor in the politics of North Dakota. It has brought him more friends and that also includes political friends."<sup>25</sup>

The active supporters of the politician were not idle. Senator Hansbrough defended McKenzie and Noyes on the Senate floor<sup>26</sup> as did Porter J. McCumber.<sup>27</sup> This was probably done in an effort to free McKenzie and for political reasons more than any great feeling for the guilt of innocence of either man. They only sought a way to have Alec released. On February 26, 1901, a petition was filed with the Supreme Court in Washington for a writ of habeas corpus.

---

<sup>22</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, February 1, 1901.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., February 25, 1901.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Lillo, op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 313.



This was refused by the high court. The Supreme Court said that the actions of McKenzie and Noyes had been dealt with correctly and the two had no legal grounds on which to stand.<sup>28</sup> Previously, the San Francisco court had attempted to charge the court costs against Alec, but had been defeated in this, because this action would have constituted a fine, which along with the imprisonment would have been illegal.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, enemies of the Scot poured hateful words upon his head. The conclusion was that his confinement was retribution for his misdeeds, and that the papers supporting him were presenting him as a martyr.

The only course left to the now desperate followers of the imprisoned Alec was an appeal to President McKinley. A presidential pardon was the only thing which would save McKenzie from the embarrassment of serving his full sentence.<sup>30</sup> The belief was that McKenzie would be pardoned by the chief executive. The Plaindealer noted that if such a pardon were given it would be due purely to personal influence, and justice would not enter into the decision. McKinley would probably release "so prominent a man and political agent as McKenzie."<sup>31</sup> A convincing argument in the appeal was physician's testimony that the Scot had lost twenty-five pounds during the brief confinement, and that his life was in danger. He was said to have attended the trial against doctor's orders. McKenzie believed that he was the victim of circumstances and that he would not have acted otherwise. He said that he had only followed orders and that his punishment was "unduly hard and unmerited."<sup>32</sup> He was failing fast under the stigma of confinement which "appears to have robbed him of all his energy."<sup>33</sup> Many believed

---

<sup>28</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, March 27, 1901.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., February 26, 1901.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., March 27, 1901.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1901.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., April 16, 1901.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.



that he would not live to finish his sentence.

Early in April the petition for pardon was sent to the president. It was signed by several senators who knew McKenzie. The reason for the support was, said the signers, "they do not believe that he would intentionally violate the law or refuse to obey a court order."<sup>34</sup> On May 27, 1901, it was reported that the president had honored the petition and McKenzie was released from prison. He had complied with the court order and turned over to the owners all of the property he had acquired while receiver. This amounted to over \$100,000. The chief reason for the pardon seemed to be the failing health of the Scot, and the fact that the circuit court which sentenced him had recommended release upon investigation of all facts concerned.<sup>35</sup>

As McKenzie's enemies had often predicted, his activities had run afoul of the law. He had been caught by the only force stronger than himself, the law. Comment as to his probable guilt or innocence took much of the time of both friend and enemy. It is not for us not to say, as we do not know the whole story. It seems rather incongruous with his early life that he should have been caught in this way, and it may have been an indication of a change of heart on McKenzie's part. Also, the mind which had driven him on to many victories may have begun to fail. From here on his activities became fewer. His health was broken and his spirit was probably at a low ebb. The success which he had enjoyed from his earliest days in North Dakota was only a memory and he never did achieve his old form and influence, although he continued on in the politics of that state. Yet it is safe to assume that he owed his freedom to his earlier activities. If he had not had such powerful friends in the senate, if he had not been so active in politics, if he had not attained the political importance

---

<sup>34</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, April 16, 1901.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., May 27, 1901.



which he did, it is very probable that he would not have been pardoned so quickly by President McKinley. His grand scheme had a very good chance for success, but the age and infirmity of Noyes hurt seriously. He had lost his keen edge and his mind could no longer grasp the details of a complicated law problem. As a result he operated outside of the law when by chance he and the entire group with McKenzie may have won their risky gamble for wealth and power. If McKenzie could have kept the San Francisco court out of the picture they could have finished their job at Nome and quickly returned to the United States where they would have had a better chance to defend themselves.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Lillo, op. cit., p. 326.



## CHAPTER IV

### LATER LIFE 1901-22

The stigma of having been convicted, sentenced and jailed for a short time did not seem to have a lasting effect upon the popularity or power of McKenzie. As Nelson wrote: "McKenzie... had grown in power and political influence. He represented not only railroads, but the banking and insurance companies, the milling and elevator companies, and the large lumber firms..."<sup>1</sup> Isolated incidents had arose to challenge the supremacy of the Scot while he was detained on the West Coast, but they were not serious or far-reaching. It was rumored that Governor White had ordered the government moved to Fargo in 1901. This was to be temporary, caused by the smallpox epidemic in Bismarck that year.<sup>2</sup> The action was thought by some to be a plot, but little came of it.

McKenzie continued his political activity, taking up where he left off in 1900. In 1904 he was reelected Republican national committeeman to succeed himself.<sup>3</sup> His name was a household word in North Dakota, and the honor of having a county and city named after him came in 1905. The need for school facilities started the farmers of Allerd and Wallace counties and old McKenzie county agitating for reorganization. They wanted one county, to be named Roosevelt in honor of the president. On July 4, 1904 the attempt was defeated in the legislature by eighteen votes. The next year,

---

<sup>1</sup>Nelson, op. cit., p. 253.

<sup>2</sup>Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer, February 23, 1901.

<sup>3</sup>Bismarck Daily Tribune, June 1, 1904.



however, a similar bill passed the legislature, only the county was then officially named McKenzie.<sup>4</sup> The backers of the bill even managed to incorporate a new town in McKenzie county, naming it Alexander.<sup>5</sup>

His name was almost a legend. In spite of his political reign which garnered him many enemies, he also had scores of friends among the people. He was to them a romantic figure, who probably represented what many of them would have liked to be, having wealth, power, adventure and personal reputation. He used his wealth to good advantage, whether it be for political gain or philanthropy. He once loaned \$20,000 to farmers of Burleigh county so that they could buy seed. He was not repaid.<sup>6</sup> He was known as the man who "evolved the plan for the first St. Alexius hospital in Bismarck."<sup>7</sup> He is credited with "bringing to Bismarck about everything it had in institutions,...his word was never broken and he dispensed charity in scores of instances without anyone knowing of his act except himself and the person aided."<sup>8</sup>

The burly Scot became so well known, and his name such a common word, that his activities, real and imagined, fathered a host of stories. One tells of a man named Anderson from Norway coming before Judge Charles A. Pollock, jurist and prohibitionist, for the final hearing on Anderson's application for naturalization.

---

<sup>4</sup>Shafer, George F., "Cattle Ranching in McKenzie County, North Dakota," North Dakota Historical Quarterly (October, 1926) Vol. 1, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup>North Dakota Federal Writers Project, North Dakota, A Guide To the Northern Prairie State, p. 220.

<sup>6</sup>Fargo Forum, undated newspaper clipping in the files of the Fargo Forum, Fargo, North Dakota.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.



In the questioning which ensued Pollock asked the Norse concerning his own type of government, saying, "They have a king over there haven't they?" Receiving an affirmative answer Pollock then asked, "Do we have a king in this country? What's his name?" Anderson replied, "Vell, I hare from book it ben Alec McKenzie."<sup>9</sup>

It was inevitable that such control as Alec and his followers had enjoyed should slowly come to an end. The old guard was dying off and the new generation was struggling to take over the reins of political influence. The Grand Forks Herald reported that "In 1906...came the revolt of the progressive element which swept John Burke, a Democrat, into the governor's chair, and put an end to much of Mr. McKenzie's power."<sup>10</sup> This was only the second time since statehood that a non-Republican governor had been elected in North Dakota. Yet McKenzie was still high in the councils of the Republican party, and the party was riding on the wave of President Roosevelt's popularity.<sup>11</sup> With this defeat the old regime began to come apart at the seams. The supporters, the voters, and the financial interests which had kept McKenzie's policies in force began to disappear to make room for the new, more progressive groups. One farmer said: "We are tired of McKenzie, who should have been in jail all these years since the Alaska looting, and we propose to vote him down."<sup>12</sup>

The Republican party in North Dakota managed to regain control in the next election, but it was a changed party. Statements

---

<sup>9</sup>Grand Forks Herald, April 1, 1906.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., June 23, 1922.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, April 1, 1906.



which would not have been made in the old days came from the Scot's camp. Senator Little, planning the campaign for the coming election in 1910, met Alec in St. Paul. Little then said that the stalwart and progressive factions would stick together, and that the Republicans were bound to win the election.<sup>13</sup> This was a concession to the rising power of the new members of the party.

During this period of gradual decline in the power of the Scot, Alec's health was failing. He spent more time taking his leisure and in visiting his many personal enterprises, one of which was the Bismarck water works. In 1921 his interests there were attacked in three bills introduced before the North Dakota senate. The proposed laws were to advance financial assistance to the city of Bismarck for the purpose of taking over the water-works, in which Alec had controlling interest.<sup>14</sup> There is no available record of whether McKenzie was in Bismarck at the time, or if he took a great deal of interest in the matter. This was but a year before his death, and he had lost his enthusiasm for a good fight, in fact he had no doubt been absent from the public scene for many years.

The Scot's refusal to allow pictures of himself to be published was one of his many individualistic traits. In 1919 he was sixty-nine years old. According to a photo taken that year and now in the files of the Fargo Forum he had looked all of those sixty-nine years. He wore glasses, had a full mustache which was then grey, and his eyebrows were still bushy and prominent. He wore a brown felt hat, a dark necktie and white shirt under a brown suit. He was still square shouldered, but did not look in the best

---

<sup>13</sup>Grand Forks Herald, April 26, 1910.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., February 19, 1921.



of health. He was not corpulent, but was a wealthy old man who had lived a good, full life.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>Fargo Forum, June 22, 1922.



## CHAPTER V

### DEATH 1922

The twilight of his career had almost become night when McKenzie visited Arizona in 1920 and California in 1921-22 for his health.<sup>1</sup> His ailments were many, but probably not so numerous as contemporary newspaper accounts intimated. One source said he suffered from acute bronchitis<sup>2</sup> and another from diabetes and complications<sup>3</sup>, both, or neither of which, may have been the case.

McKenzie had just returned from the California trip and was living in St. Paul, apparently in fairly good health, when he had a relapse. He was rushed to a local hospital where he died June 22, 1922.<sup>4</sup> His death was felt in political circles from Bismarck to Washington. The Fargo Forum, often his foe, commented:

He played the game of politics not for the money that was in it, or for office or personal glory, but for the realization of his ambition to attain a place of power and dominance...[he] was of the type that refused to recognize defeat...None knew better how to overwhelm an opponent by the sheer force of his attack, but...[he] learned how to avoid obstacles instead of battering his way through them.<sup>5</sup>

The death of this great personality opened a dam of opinion never before aired. Many men his enemies during his turbulent career spoke from the heart in praise. Where politics had once barred such comment, now there was only remembrance. Respect for the Scot

---

<sup>1</sup>Fargo Forum, June 23, 1922.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Grand Forks Herald, June 23, 1922.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Fargo Forum, June 23, 1922.



was shown on every side. The Grand Forks Herald ran in its editorial column the day after McKenzie's death this eulogy:

The man whose hand for more than 30 years wrote the political history of North Dakota is dead...Mr. McKenzie was the greatest and most enduring personification of immense political power in the hand of a single man that North Dakota has ever known, or ever will know...he<sup>6</sup> was a bigger man than those who sought to overthrow him.

This from the paper of George B. Winship, is worth noting.

The writer continued:

The steady march of progress has brought about the death of the political system of which Mr. McKenzie was North Dakota's greatest exponent, and so whatever evil the dead chieftain did will be interred with his bones. Let the good, and there was much good, live after him, and be remembered, for friends and enemies alike will unite in saying "He was a man."<sup>7</sup>

The people of Bismarck asked the executors of the estate, and his family, that the dead body be brought to Bismarck for burial. This is believed to have been McKenzie's wish also; the request was honored and the funeral set for June 25,<sup>8</sup> the body to be buried in St. Mary's cemetery in Bismarck.<sup>9</sup> The body lay in state on the steps of the capital building, and the funeral was held there.<sup>10</sup>

Father M. J. Hiltner of Bismarck officiated at the services, but that brings in a different topic which will be dealt with later.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Grand Forks Herald, June 23, 1922.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., June 24, 1922.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., June 25, 1922.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., June 22, 1922.



Friends, enemies, and political opponents flocked to the funeral. The ceremony was very impressive, and few eyes were dry at the conclusion.<sup>12</sup> Pallbearers were E. G. Patterson, former owner of the Patterson Hotel in Bismarck which was McKenzie's hotel before that; W. H. Webb, E. A. Williams, D. G. McGillis, T. H. Poole, Judge Andrew Miller, all of Bismarck; Geo. D. Mann, owner of the Minneapolis Tribune; and Gilbert Haggart of Fargo.<sup>13</sup> Others from out of town were J. D. Bacon of the Fargo Forum, M. J. Hanley of Mandan, Senator C. B. Little and many others.<sup>14</sup>

McKenzie was a wealthy man when he died, some say the wealthiest in North Dakota. Among his possessions was a large ranch near the Fort Yates Indian reservation.<sup>15</sup> His estate was estimated at over \$900,000 in real property, securities, and personal possessions.<sup>16</sup> The exact total was \$979,183.25, mostly in bonds. McKenzie left large amounts of Liberty Bonds, a large block of St. Paul city bonds, and more than \$250,000 in bonds of the City of Bismarck. The Water Supply Company stock formed a substantial part of the estate.<sup>17</sup>

McKenzie's friends were due for another shock, a surprise which no one expected. The canny Scot had kept the details of his personal life a closely guarded secret for many years. For the last dozen years he had merely maintained a voting residence in

---

<sup>12</sup>Mrs. Florence H. Davis.

<sup>13</sup>Fargo Forum, June 26, 1922.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., June 23, 1922.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., August 1, 1922.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.



Bismarck, and had lived in St. Paul and New York. Thus he was able to keep his private affairs out of the public eye.

Everyone knew of his marriage to Mary Ann Hayes in 1873. He had two daughters and a son by that union as previously related. In 1887 McKenzie and his wife were divorced and he bought a home for her and the two girls at 737 Ashland Avenue in St. Paul.<sup>18</sup> Mrs. McKenzie died there in 1898. The will revealed the previously unknown fact that McKenzie had remarried in 1890. His second wife was Mrs. Tyler, nee Elva A. Stewart, the wife of a Bismarck gunsmith whom she divorced in 1890.<sup>19</sup> A story of not too wholesome content had circulated concerning the relations of McKenzie and Mrs. Tyler in Bismarck. Details were lacking and interest soon subsided. The tale was that McKenzie paid Tyler \$5000 for not contesting the divorce. He died out west soon after this. It was claimed that Mrs. Tyler had a son, Louis by her first husband. He supposedly tried to have his name included in the will but failed. The gossip also maintained that Mrs. Tyler had an eye operation previous to her divorce, the expenses being paid by McKenzie. Their union was kept a secret, as they were married in St. Paul and the Bismarck people knew nothing of it. After the Alaska incident, it was said that the second Mrs. McKenzie lost interest in her husband and was set up in a house in Yonkers, New York. Later she and the two sons and a daughter were moved to Atlantic City. She soon returned to Yonkers however.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Bismarck Tribune, September 14, 1922.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Also taken from the Alexander McKenzie file of the Fargo Forum. The material is undated and labeled "not for publication" at that time.

<sup>20</sup> Bismarck Tribune, September 14, 1922.



The children of the second marriage were Jeanette, Alexander Jr., and Thomas.<sup>21</sup> Judge George T. Flannery of St. Paul was then McKenzie's closest friend and legal advisor. He is the one who made public the details of the Scot's second marriage. Going through the letters and telegrams of the deceased he found among other material a letter from Jeanette.<sup>22</sup> The children of his second marriage said that there was always an air of mystery about their father. He did not live with them for any extended period, and they knew nothing about his business. The children of his first marriage knew nothing of his second union,<sup>23</sup> but one of the girls said, "He was the best father a girl ever had, and the memory picture I carry of him is one of the sweetest things in life to me."<sup>24</sup>

We cannot ascertain just why McKenzie kept his private life so much of a secret, but the reason may be determined to some extent from what we know of the man. His political activities were sometimes subject to brutal and violent attack, and being a kindly man, especially where his family were concerned, it is logical to assume that he did not want them brought into the controversies. He was a man always behind the scenes; the only public office he ever held was that of sheriff of Burleigh county, and that was early in his career. He probably did not want any more publicity than was absolutely necessary. This is brought out by the character of the information available on him at this time. Most of that

---

<sup>21</sup>Grand Forks Herald, August 16, 1922.

<sup>22</sup>Bismarck Tribune, September 14, 1922.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.



material is antagonistic to him. He had control over friendly comment and allowed only so much of that. He undoubtedly believed that his private life was just that, and not to be mixed with his public doings. His second wife may have been his mistress first, and he wanted to avoid scandal.

Much comment was made later about his religious affiliation. He was buried in the Catholic cemetery of St. Mary's Church of Bismarck, and a Catholic priest said the holy words over his last remains. It is believed that McKenzie was originally a Protestant, and was so when he divorced his first wife.<sup>25</sup> Then sometime after that he was taken into the Catholic Church, probably after his second marriage, because he divorced his first wife when they could no longer live together in harmony. He did not divorce his second wife after they became estranged. The Catholic Church does not condone divorce. The approximate time of his religious conversion can be determined. His first wife died in 1898 as noted. He could not enter the church a divorced man, at least it is very unlikely. About the year 1901 he was separated from his second wife, but not divorced. So between the death of his first wife in 1898 and his separation from his second wife in 1901 he joined the Catholic Church.

In May 1922, McKenzie traveled to New York, not an unusual occurrence in the minds of his friends. This was not for the usual reasons however. On May 23, 1922 the second Mrs. McKenzie died in New York and Alec went to her funeral. The object of this trip was not even known to Judge Flannery with whom McKenzie was in daily contact, but was also revealed after McKenzie's death.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Mrs. Florence H. Davis.

<sup>26</sup>Grand Forks Herald, June 30, 1922.



The North Dakota political boss died at the age of seventy-two. He was wealthy, respected, and he had sons and daughters to carry on his name. He left behind him an era of rapid development in political methods. Contrary to predictions, his name has not been remembered. The reason for this is obscure, but may be determined by looking over the facts of his life. His was a character in politics not seen today. His type would no doubt be out of place in our present day world. But for his time he was the best. He gave to the state a story unique in the annals of North Dakota.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Alexander McKenzie caused a sharp division of opinion during his career in North Dakota. He embodied much of what many men wished they could have been. His importance to North Dakota and its history is difficult to state in cold, unbiased terms. To some he was a devil, but to many he was almost a saint. He received much praise for aiding the needy, paying hospital expenses, financing worthy enterprises in which he had no direct interest, helping get jobs for those down and out. He had friendship, a large personal following, and close kinship to the people of Bismarck who knew him longest and best.<sup>1</sup> McKenzie was an unusual figure, as the Fargo Forum stated, "Alexander McKenzie was unique as a product of the frontier period blended with the ultimate in political acumen, business sagacity and the knowledge of the moderns ...[he] dominated the destiny of the state at crucial times... a tremendous force."<sup>2</sup> His importance to the state is an elusive value, but his place in history should be unquestioned. The day after his death the Fargo Forum ran the following:

The present generation of North Dakotans is not likely to see another Alexander McKenzie. The leaders of this generation are of another type but the name of "Big Alec" will always stand out in the history of North Dakota.

[McKenzie] was a soldier of fortune. He never "settled down." He was a citizen of a continent and not of one town... The

---

<sup>1</sup>Fargo Forum. Taken from undated material in the files of the Fargo Forum.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., June 22, 1922.



hold he had upon his followers was amazing at times. They spoke of him as almost a superman and their attitude towards him was one approaching reverence...his loyalty to his own friends and to the state which he looked upon as his home...was never questioned.<sup>3</sup>

Prominent men of the 1920's spoke much of McKenzie, his deeds, and what their personal judgement was of the man who had ruled North Dakota politics for so many years. Newspaper accounts are the best source of information on that score. Soon after the death of the able Scot most state newspapers carried summaries of his life. A short compilation of judgement by some of these newspapers is given here:

In Bismarck McKenzie was made sheriff and from that office rapidly established himself as a leader of stalwart Republicans...his power was such that he was credited with a major part in naming all North Dakota senators during the first twenty-four years of its statehood, with the exception of W. N. Roach, a Democrat.<sup>4</sup>

He was described as the Warwick of North Dakota, or its boss...In his maturer years he has (sic) given more of his time to the development of important personal interests. His big square frame and large bulk were as well known in Washington, New York and St. Paul as they once were in Bismarck.<sup>5</sup>

McKenzie was part of the convention which nominated Harding. He directed the political activities of his friend and associate, Senator Porter J. McCumber. He was many times involved in the politics of Minnesota, South Dakota and Montana. He seldom wrote letters and he scrupulously shunned publicity, although he had the largest personal following in the state. He was an intimate friend of James J. Hill, the railroad builder, and was a good friend of

---

<sup>3</sup>Fargo Forum, June 23, 1922.

<sup>4</sup>Grand Forks Herald, June 23, 1922.

<sup>5</sup>Fargo Forum, June 22, 1922.



William H. Taft when Taft was Chief Justice.<sup>6</sup> His circle of acquaintances was large, and he was respected for his fine qualities, and sought after for his keen political wisdom. His name has not gone down in the history books of the state in a way which would reflect due credit on him as a man or as a politician. Little evidence remains of his activities, and little recognition has been afforded him, with a few exceptions. In 1938 a monument was erected over his grave in Bismarck. Promoted by Gilbert Haggart, a fund raising campaign was started. The money was soon gathered and Hynek Rynicek of Mandan was commissioned to cut the stone, a seven ton marker, to be placed on the grave. A ceremony was planned and Governor William Langer and Attorney Thomas Murphy of Fargo were secured as speakers.<sup>7</sup> The inscription on the marker is very simple: "Alexander McKenzie, April 3, 1850—June 22, 1922."<sup>8</sup>

Some men who knew McKenzie when he was old and mellow and more easily persuaded to talk of his deeds still live. Representative William Lemke is one. Lemke did not know McKenzie well, but talked to him one day a few years before McKenzie's death. McKenzie knew he and his followers were through as powers in the state, wrote Lemke. The North Dakota Representative was not of the same political faith as was McKenzie, but he admired the man greatly. Lemke wrote:

His success in politics is due to the fact that he kept his word, and when he made a promise, he stuck to it.

---

<sup>6</sup>Fargo Forum, June 23, 1922.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., December 28, 1938.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.



He rewarded his followers, and punished his enemies... McKenzie was a man of dignity, and his purpose was to make North Dakota a better state.<sup>9</sup>

As to the importance to and lasting effect on the state exercised by McKenzie, Lemke stated:

Alexander McKenzie was just a passing phase in the political life of our state, and that during his time the state marched forward the same as other states...The people [have] outgrown the political machine of McKenzie, and also the political period of Alexander McKenzie.<sup>10</sup>

Alexander McKenzie was the product of his time. A rugged individualist, he governed his life according to his own standards and bowed to no man. He is to be censured, as are all men, but he is also to be ranked with the first citizens of North Dakota. His memory has not been held secure. The people of his time erred in not leaving for the future the details in the life of this great man. He himself is to be blamed to some extent, but this is only another indication of his modesty and desire for the background which he sought all of his life.

---

<sup>9</sup>Personal letter from Representative William Lemke of North Dakota, dated August 2, 1948. This letter is in the possession of the author.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books

- Crawford, Lewis, History of North Dakota, III Volumes, New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1931.
- Dayton, Edson C., Dakota Days, May 1886 - August 1898, Hartford: Privately Printed, 1937.
- Hagedorn, Hermann, Roosevelt in the Badlands, New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921.
- Hennesy, William B., History of North Dakota, Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune, 1910.
- Kingsbury, George W., History of Dakota Territory, II Volumes, Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1915.
- Lounsberry, Clement A., Early History of North Dakota, III Volumes, Bismarck: Liberty Press, 1919.
- Nelson, Bruce, Land of the Dacotahs, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1946.
- Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of North Dakota, North Dakota, A Guide to the Northern Prairie States, Fargo, North Dakota: Knight Printing Company, 1938.
- Waldo, Edna L., Dakota, Bismarck: Capitol Publishing Company, 1932, and Caxton Publishing Company, 1936.

### Periodicals

- Potter, Merle, "The North Dakota Capitol Fight," North Dakota Historical Quarterly, Vol. VII (October, 1932), pp. 325-36.
- Severson, Emma, "History of Crary," Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Edited by Orin G. Libby, Vol. VII (October, 1925), pp. 287-306.
- Shafer, George F., "Cattle Ranching in McKenzie County, North Dakota," North Dakota Historical Quarterly, Vol. I (October, 1926), pp. 55-61.

### Government Documents

- Dakota Territorial Census, 1885, Original manuscript in the North Dakota State Historical Society, Bismarck.
- The Federal Reporter, Vol. 106, St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1901.



Newspapers

Bismarck Capitol, 1938-1947.

Bismarck Tribune, 1886-1922.

Fargo Forum, 1922-1946. Much undated material from clippings on  
Alexander McKenzie.

Grand Forks Herald, 1906-1922.

Grand Forks Plaindealer, 1882-1901.

Unpublished Material

Reedy, Robert E., "The Administration of Nehemiah G. Ordway,  
Governor of Dakota Territory, 1880-84," Master's Thesis,  
University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota: 1935.

Lillo, Waldemar E., "The Alaska Gold Mining Company and The Cape  
Nome Conspiracy," Doctor's Thesis, University of North  
Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota: 1935.

LIBRARY  
DEC 10 1960